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The Christian Mission:
Its Motive and Its Task

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One of a series of speeches delivered at the 1952 Assembly of the World Christian Mission held at Toronto, Canada

DIVISION OF FOREIGN MISSIONS
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THERE was a time when Christians didn't feel the need to re-examine the Christian Mission. They didn't need to ask why they had missionaries, and what missionaries were supposed to do. It was almost axiomatic. It was simple, and dangerous, and overwhelmingly urgent. It was as simple as the command of Christ, and as urgent as life and death. For millions upon millions were dying without Christ. Every second saw more souls slipping into a Christless eternity. No one had ever given them a chance. No one had ever told them that they could live forever in Christ. Faced with a challenge as simple as that, the Church exploded into the modern missionary movement, a race against time and against the devil for the greatest of all prizes, the eternal salvation of the human soul.

If you are expecting me to ridicule that challenge, I am going to disappoint you. It has never seemed ridiculous to me. As a matter of fact, in large measure it was the challenge which sent me to the mission field. But you know as well as I that there came a day of the shaking of the foundations. The old urgencies were denied, or at least ignored. No one seemed sure of anything eternal any more.

So the challenge changed. The Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council said: "Our fathers were impressed with horror that men should die without Christ; we are equally impressed with horror that they should live without Christ." It was a shift of balance, really, more than a denial—a strategic withdrawal to what was considered firmer ground. Millions upon millions are living in misery and in filth. No one can deny that. No one has ever given them a chance. No one has ever helped them to the life abundant that Jesus came to give them. It was a challenge to a future in history—a future without hunger and without hate, without sickness and without tears, where all men are brothers and the nations shall study war no more. So the Church went forth to build the Kingdom.

I do not intend to ridicule this view either. It has never seemed ridiculous to me to feed the hungry and heal the sick and work for peace. But again you know as well as I how the paralysis of doubt struck once more. The foundations shook and the roof fell

in. Wars, depressions, brutalities, corruptions in a disheartening crescendo of defeat—and all this within what too many had believed *was* the Kingdom, western civilization. The Kingdom refused to stay built, and the builders began to lose hope.

Those have been the two familiar symbols of the missionary: the saver of souls, and the builder of the Kingdom. The problem of our time is that neither is quite able to carry all Christendom with him to the Mission.

Actually, in basic motivation, there is not much difference between the saver of souls and the builder of the Kingdom. In both the motive is love. But I am beginning to question just how far love is the motive of the Christian Mission. Was it the motive in the original mission of the Church?

Of course, love is fundamental. It was love that started the mission. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." But that was the love of God, the Father. The missionary was God the Son.

Of course, I am not preparing to deny that it was love that brought Christ into the world on His mission of reconciliation. However, it may be worth noting that the Bible does not say so. It is full of His love for men, a compassion that knows no bounds, but where are we told that He came to the world because He loved it? Insofar as the Bible distinguishes between the Son and the Father in reference to the mission, it tells us that the Father founds the mission because He loves, the Son goes on the mission because He is sent. The motive of the Son, the missionary, is *obedience.*

Look at the glimpse Paul gives us into the mind of Christ before the mission. The lesson is not love, but humility and obedience, "even unto the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8). He loves the world, of course, but He goes because He is sent. He loves the whole world, but He goes to the Jews because He is sent. That is the only explanation He gives of the narrowness of His mission: "I am not sent but to the lost sheep in Israel." He loves the world enough to die for it, but He goes to the cross because He is sent: "Not my will, but thine, be done." The insistent, compelling motive of the mission is

obedience. God is love, but it is obedience that forges and focusses and incarnates that love into a mission.

The lesson is absolutely the same when we turn to the apostles, the first missionaries of the Church. Was it love for a despised and rejected race that sent Philip to the Ethiopians? Not according to the record. "The angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, 'Arise and go.'" And he went. Was it love that sent Peter to the proud and unclean, to the centurion? Not according to the record. "The spirit said unto him, 'Arise and go' . . ." And he went.

Was it a passion for millions of lost Gentile souls, dying without hope and without Christ, that made Paul the apostle to the Gentiles? He loved his own people too much for that. But obedience made him a missionary. "Separate me Barnabas and Saul," says the Spirit, and obedience sent him, almost reluctantly, to the Gentiles. "The Lord commanded me, saying, 'I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles.'" In the strange new world of the Bible, apostles and missionaries are made not by looking at the world in love, but by listening to God in obedience. They go in love, but they go because they obey.

At this point most of us are inclined to change the subject in embarrassment and go on to more practical things like techniques and methods, and campaigns and appeals. How can we wait around for missionaries to listen to the voice of God? I remember a girl in college who was earnest and intense and desperately wanted to go as a missionary to Africa. But God had not called her. There were no voices, no visions, and this inexplicable silence on the part of God was making her almost ill with anxiety. So one night, a tough-minded, realistic friend of mine stepped in to take a hand. She gathered a group of girls together, robed them all in white sheets, and at midnight stole into the troubled girl's room, moaning in hollow tones, "Come to Africa. Come to Africa."

Don't laugh at the poor girl, waiting for the voice of God. She was as much right as wrong: wrong in her stereotyped ideas of how God speaks, but completely right in believing that without the positive assurance of God's leading she would never be a missionary, even if she did go to Africa. In a

sense, we are only dressing ourselves up in white sheets and stealing upon the unwary, when we settle for the presentation of a lesser motive.

Weigh carefully all the hundreds of other factors: Christian love, desperate need, health, talent, strategy, Scripture itself. I would not dare to minimize their importance. But not all of them together can properly send the Christian to his mission until he can gather from them, as did Paul from the vision at Troas, the assurance that the Lord has called him to preach the gospel, not where he is, but *there* where God sends him.

Last week I heard a very great missionary speak movingly of the Christian mission as "a war of amazing kindness." As I read the book of the Acts of the Apostles, another phrase comes to mind. It is also "a war of amazing assurance," the assurance that God has spoken, and we obey. The motive is obedience.

And what is the task? What does the missionary do over there? Well, he'd better do what God tells him to do. I am beginning to think that at least one reason why I was thrown out of China as an embezzler was for doing what God did *not* tell me to do. Let me hasten to add that I didn't really embezzle. All I did was keep the books as treasurer for mission and presbytery, but I was an American with financial responsibilities, and that is all the Communists needed to slap an embezzlement charge on me. I can tell you now with all the great clarity of hindsight that God had not called me to keep financial records. It was the best lesson I have ever had on the urgency of the need for transfer of authority to the younger Church.

After all, that is what God sends us to do. The task is to build up the Church. It is the essential task that sets apart the missionary from all other callings. He goes from a church that is able to send, like Antioch, to a land that has no church, or to a church that is not yet able to take its full place in the mission. I still like the classical definition of the full church: self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting.

The crucial question is: How do we build such a church? I don't want to be trapped here on the horns of the usual dilemma: How are you going to

build that church; by saving souls, or by saving society? When did God tell us to do either one? I can't save souls. Souls are saved by the Holy Spirit. And I can't save society. Society will be saved, and the Kingdom built, only by the Triumphant Christ. The missionary is not sent out to be God. He is sent out only to obey Him. And I think God sends us, as He sent his first missionaries, to *witness* and to serve. It is as simple—and as difficult—as that. First, witness. Tell the good news. That is something, God says, that you can do about saving souls, and He will do the rest. And second, serve. Help others in love, as you are able. That is something you can do for society, and He will do the rest. The saver of souls and the builder of the Kingdom must learn obedience in these two simple tasks. That is the way the Church is built.

The first task is witness. Tell the good news. That is the useless side of Christianity, our Communist friends liked to tell us. "Look at us," they said. "We get results: land reform, economic justice, and an end to feudalism. What does the Church do for the people? It talks!" I have just seen a new release from the Far Eastern Joint Office of the Division of Foreign Missions quoting a Chinese Communist listing of the order of importance of various occupations. It begins with soldiers, then moves on through a long list of professions in a descending order of usefulness, until it comes to a dismal end with "prostitutes and missionaries."

The Christian must reply that in the sense those Communists understood "usefulness," our main task is not to be useful at all. They were interested in the Church only as a tool in building up a new China. But the Church belongs to God and not to man, and it is not intended to become the tool of any social order—imperialist, or capitalist, or communist. You remember how the Jews wanted to use Jesus as a tool in building up a new Israel. They wanted to make Him king, and He would have made a very good king. But He refused. He said, "I came into the world to bear witness to the truth."

We are simply not sent to build the Church into a useful tool for society. We are sent to tell the truth. I don't base my answer to the question, "Do we need the Church?" on any long list of Chris-

tianity's contributions to civilization. I am a Christian, not because the Church brought schools and education to England, or the eight-hour working day to America, or ploughs to India, or modern medicine to China. All that is true, but that is not why I am a Christian. I am a Christian, and I belong to the Church, because from the days of the apostles men have been proclaiming a truth that changed history and that changed my life: that Jesus Christ lived and died and rose again. How is the Church built but by Christians? And how are Christians made but by Jesus Christ? And how can they know Him if they are not told of Him? There is no greater mission than to bear witness to the saving, liberating gospel of the truth in Jesus Christ.

But Jesus also said, "I came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." The second task is service. It is not quite right to say that the missionary's main task is just to tell the truth. His task is to win men to the truth, in Christ, which is something far harder and more important. It is the beauty of Christian service that it makes Christian truth easier to believe.

Hu Shih once said that China has five great enemies; "poverty, disease, ignorance, greed, and disorder." A witness to truth that has no relevance to "poverty, disease, ignorance, greed, and disorder" will never win China for Christ, and it is no more a Christian witness than a Christ who scorned the poor and ignored the sick and refused to teach the ignorant is the Christ of the New Testament. The Church in China has been truer to its Lord than that, and I am proud of its record in leading the way in the struggle against these enemies.

Take the evil of poverty. It was a Christian who first directed the use of modern methods to combat the age-old curse of the river floods which sweep away every year thousands of tons of China's precious land. It was a Christian who first developed drought-resistant grain for North China to lift its farmers from the gnawing hunger of their uncertain struggle for existence.

Or take the fight against disease. Was it only coincidence that in 1945 all of Free China had only 130 civilian hospitals with over 20 beds, and of these 130 hospitals, 113 were Christian hospitals! And the

war against ignorance. Up until the war with Japan, one out of every four of China's college students was in a Christian college. I am proud that the Christian Church in China has made China's fight against these enemies a Christian fight.

And yet, from the Christian viewpoint, there is something wrong in saying that China's greatest enemies are poverty, disease, ignorance, greed, and disorder. Some years ago I read an account in *Newsweek* of three doctors, specialists at a medical school, who went into the hospital wards for some case illustrations for their lectures. One was a psychiatrist, and he found a patient suffering from a severe nervous breakdown. One was a skin specialist. He found a woman suffering from a bad skin disease. One was an expert on the stomach and digestive troubles. He found a patient with persistent diarrhea. No one noticed that the object lesson used by all three of the great specialists was the same woman, until an old country doctor, a general practitioner, glanced at her case history and cried: "Dementia, dermatitis, diarrhea! Why, this woman has pellagra!" And he was right. The others saw the symptoms. He knew the disease.

Perhaps we have done too much specializing in our diagnosis of the ills of the world. "Poverty, disease, ignorance, greed, and disorder"—all that is true. But there is a deeper ill than these, a sickness unto death which will never be cured by surface attacks on the lesser evils, any more than that woman's pellagra could have been cured by individual treatment for nervousness, skin disease, and diarrhea. The real disease, the disease that troubles the whole world, is sin. Ultimately, the trouble is not with the world, with our environment—that is the Communist diagnosis, and it is wrong. Ultimately, the trouble is with ourselves.

Here is the field of greatest service the missionary can render to the world. Here both sides of his great task become one. Here witness to truth becomes service, and the Church is built as weary sin-sick people turn to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, who takes away the sin of the world.

But there is one hard fact that we had better face at this point, in conclusion. More people have turned to Communism in my lifetime than have

turned to Jesus Christ. There are as many people asking, Why is the Mission a failure?—as, What is its motive and task? Is the mission a failure? We have obeyed and gone out. We have witnessed and we have served. Why don't the people follow us?

Well, why should the people follow us? I am wondering if there is not still another final lesson in obedience that we must learn. Not long ago I heard a young pastor speak of the story of doubting Thomas. Why did the disciple insist on seeing the print of the nails; why did he thrust his hands into the wound in the side? It was more than simply to identify the Risen Lord. He wanted to be sure that the Lord who was asking him to follow was indeed the same Lord who had suffered for him. Only then did he follow.

Perhaps our trouble is that most of the world no longer identifies us with Christ. To most of the world, the symbol of the missionary is not even the saver of souls, or the builder of the Kingdom. It may be unjust, but to most of the world the symbol of the Christian missionary is a soft, white, rich Westerner. And why should the people follow that? They look at the Communist— and whatever else you say about the Communist, you must credit him with this—that he is ready to sacrifice and to suffer and die. Then people look at us who have lost the marks of suffering of our Lord.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not ask to suffer. It is our Lord's suffering, not mine, that saves. But how can we ask the world to follow us to Jesus Christ until we are ready ourselves to follow Him? And He still says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." What have I really denied myself? What real cross do I bear?

It is "a war of amazing assurance," this mission of ours, but only in the obedience of suffering.

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